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Jesus of Nazareth





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JESUS OF NAZARETH,

A Divine Person, and the True Messiah.

THE DESIGN OF HIS MISSION.

The Day of His Birth Not to be Celebrated.

A Discourse,

PREACHED IN THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

IN THE CITY OF NEW-YORK, DECEMBER, 1847,

BY W. W. PHILLIPS, D. D.

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1848.



JESUS OF NAZARETH.



1 TIMOTHY I. 15:

“THIS IS A FAITHFUL SAYING, AND WORTHY OF ALL ACCEPTATION, THAT CHRIST JESUS CAME INTO THE WORLD TO SAVE SINNERS, OF WHOM I AM CHIEF.”



THE writer of this epistle could recommend the gospel, from his own experience of its excellency. He could speak with confidence of the fulness, freeness and efficacy of the grace of God, having been made a subject of it himself. He felt deeply sensible, also, of his obligations to the Lord Jesus Christ. His heart was filled with love for him; he could not mention his name on any occasion, without at the same time expressing his gratitude to him, or giving him praise. He was ever mindful of the great change which had been effected in

his state and character, whilst he uniformly ascribed it to the rich and sovereign grace of God. He had been the chief of sinners, and as such had deserved the most exemplary punishment; but instead of that, he had received the highest honor. Though he had been a blasphemer, a persecutor and injurious, he was made a minister and an apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. He declared that he had obtained mercy, because, in opposing Christ and his cause, he had acted ignorantly and through unbelief. He did not persecute the people of God, knowing them to be so, and because they were so, but because he regarded them as the enemies of God, and thought he thereby did God service. He subsequently discovered, however, that he had not in the least degree commended himself to God by this or any other service—that his zeal and sincerity had not been according to knowledge—nor on the side of truth, but against it. He was as destitute of righteousness in the sight of God, as though he had never performed any religious duty. Therefore did he “count all things but loss, for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus his Lord.” He acknowledged

“that, by the grace of God he was what he was.” “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.”

Such were the views he entertained of himself, and of the mercy he had obtained. Nor did he consider that he had been put into the ministry on account of any worthiness, or faithfulness, or usefulness foreseen. He thanked the Lord Jesus Christ who had put him into the ministry, and who enabled him to execute it. He who commissioned him, imparted to him the gifts and grace which he exercised, and made him faithful.

Having thus spoken of the exceedingly abundant grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, he uttered the declaration recorded in the 15th verse of this chapter, which contains a summary of the whole gospel.

The coming of Christ into the world, was the greatest and most important, as well as the most wonderful and glorious event that has ever occurred in time ; one in which the human family is more deeply interested, and in which God has magnified his name more

than in any other. The divine grace and condescension which have been thus manifested are without a parallel, and beyond our conception; and the benefits which have been thus purchased for the children of men are unspeakable. We may, for the sake of method, consider

I. THE FACT, AND ITS CREDIBILITY, THAT CHRIST JESUS CAME INTO THE WORLD. *What does it imply? How has it been authenticated?* The apostle declares that "it is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance."

II. THE OBJECT OF HIS MISSION. *He came "to save sinners, even the chief."*

III. THE TIME OF HIS BIRTH, AND THE MANNER OF ITS COMMEMORATION.

I. *The form of expression used by the apostle evidently implies the previous existence of the Lord Jesus Christ.* The Scriptures teach us that he was sent by the Father, and at the same time that he came voluntarily and cheerfully into the world. His birth was not the beginning of his existence. "God sent forth

his Son," one who was his Son, who had been with God from everlasting, who was God and would have continued to be God if he had never come into this world. He was a partaker of the divine nature, "being in the form of God, and thought it not robbery to be equal with God." No other could have been "the brightness of his Father's glory" or "the express image of his person." No other could have made known the attributes of Jehovah by representing him to men as "the image of the invisible God," or have made known the counsels of eternity. No other could have performed the work which the Father had given him to do. When he appeared, therefore, in the body which had been prepared for him—"in that true tabernacle which the Lord pitched, and not man"—he appeared as *Immanuel*, God with us, God manifest in the flesh. The work of our redemption must be performed in our nature. "Inasmuch as the children were partakers of flesh and blood, he likewise took part of the same," that he might obey the law, and suffer for the transgressions of it which the children had committed, and that "through death, he might destroy death, and him that had the power of it, i. e.,

the devil, and deliver them who through the fear of death were all their life-time subject to bondage." He must have somewhat to offer for sin, and he must in all points be tempted like as we are, but without sin; that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God." "Without shedding of blood there is no remission." Whilst the blood of bulls and of goats could never take away sin. At the same time our redemption must be wrought out by one who was more than man; by one who had power over his own life, to lay it down and to take it again; who could endure the penalty of the law, give infinite value to his atonement; who might live to send the Holy Spirit, to quicken the dead in trespasses and in sins, to sanctify his people who might receive their homage as their Saviour, and preserve them unto life everlasting; wherefore, Jesus the Son of God, who loved us, and whose delights had been with the sons of men from everlasting, beholding us in our lost and perishing condition, said, "Save from going down to the pit; I have found a ransom." If sacrifice and burnt-offering be not sufficient, "Lo, I come : in the volume of the book it is written of

me, I delight to do thy will, O my God." Thus he came of his own free choice, to do the will of him that sent him. Those Jews who were enlightened and waited for the consolation of Israel, expected the Messiah as the Son of God. When Jesus asked his disciples, "Whom say ye that I am? Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." As such he had been promised. The devils which were cast out by him cried out saying, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." It is also said, "these are written that we might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God;" and it is evident that the Jews understood by the *Son* of God, one who is God, in the proper and highest sense of that expression. When Jesus said, "My Father worketh hitherto, and I work, the Jews sought the more to kill him, because he not only had broken the Sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, *making himself equal* with God. The high priest said to him, I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell me whether thou be *the* Christ, the Son of God? Jesus saith to him, Thou hast said;" which was equivalent to saying, I am. "Then the high priest rent his

clothes, saying, He has spoken blasphemy." If he meant no more than that he was called the Son of God on account of his office, or mission, or resurrection, wherein consisted the blasphemy of his reply? If the Jews understood him to say only that he was *virtually* in the place of God to them, being sent as an ambassador, as Moses was a god to Pharaoh, then why did they cry out blasphemy, and for that blasphemy put him to death? If they understood him correctly, as they undoubtedly did—for he did not complain of having been misunderstood—then what becomes of the figment of those who say that the Jews had no idea that Jesus taught his pre-existence and proper divinity, and that he never asserted either?

But how do we know that Jesus came into the world, that this is a true and faithful saying, to be relied upon with perfect confidence, and that it is "worthy of all acceptance?" In addition to the testimony of the apostle in this place, we may reply that it was promised immediately after the fall of our first parents; that it was the subject of repeated prophecies, and was represented by various typical institutions. The principal design of

the Old Testament scriptures and worship was to reveal the *Messiah*, the Saviour of the world, and to shadow forth his offices and work. "To him bear all the prophets witness," whilst he was the substance of all the types and shadows of the law. The first prediction of him was general and indefinite—no more was revealed than that he should be of the human family. He who was to bruise the head of the serpent, who was to break up the alliance which had been formed between man and Satan; was to be the "seed of the woman." The same revelation of God's purpose of grace and mercy to man was made to Abraham, designating *him* as the great progenitor according to the flesh, of the promised seed. It was said to him, "In thee, and in thy seed, shall all the nations of the earth be blessed." From that period the promise of the coming Saviour was made in a more restricted and definite form. It was to be fulfilled in the line of Isaac and of Jacob, conferring on the nation of Israel the signal honor of giving to the world a Saviour. Out of the twelve tribes one was selected and named, from which Messiah was to spring. "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his

feet, until Shiloh come ; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be." Subsequently the Lord raised up out of that tribe the royal family of David, of whose seed, according to the flesh, it was promised that Christ should come.

Such was to be the lineage of the Messiah ; and according to these predictions, designating his nation, tribe and family, was he expected. The Jews understood well that Christ was to come " of the family of David, of the tribe of Judah, and of the seed of Abraham." That Jesus of Nazareth did come in this line and according to this promise, is attested by the Evangelists who have written his history, and was not denied at the time of his manifestation in the flesh. Until then, the genealogies of the tribes and families of Israel had been carefully kept. The Evangelists had access to them, and copied them ; Matthew giving us the genealogy of Joseph, the reputed father of Jesus, and Luke the genealogy of Mary his mother, to prove satisfactorily that both on the side of his father and mother, according to the flesh, Christ came in fulfilment of the promise and predictions of him. This was one of the modes by which God was

pleased to designate the true Messiah, and by which he might be distinguished from impostors.

Another mark by which he was to be recognized, was the time within which he was to appear. The first and least definite period within which he was to appear, was whilst Judah should continue the governing tribe of Israel. In the next place it was predicted that he should set up his kingdom during the existence of the Roman empire. Daniel declared, in the interpretation of the king's dream, "that in the days of those kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed." He was to come, also, before the destruction of the second Temple. "I will shake all nations, saith the Lord," by the prophet Haggai, "and the Desire of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with my glory, saith the Lord of hosts. The silver is mine and the gold is mine, saith the Lord of Hosts: the glory of this latter house shall be greater than that of the former, saith the Lord of hosts; and in this place will I give peace."

It is well known that the outward and material splendor of the second Temple could

not be compared with that of the former. But it was the personal presence of the Saviour in the second Temple, which was to make it more glorious than the first. Still farther, that there might be no mistake as to the time, the Lord, in his infinite condescension, saw fit to reveal and specify the definite period of his coming. An angel was commissioned to declare to Daniel, saying, "Seventy weeks are determined upon thy people and upon thy holy city, to finish the transgression and to make an end of sins, and to make reconciliation for iniquity, and to bring in everlasting righteousness, and to seal up the vision of prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy; know, therefore, and understand, that from the going forth of the commandment to restore and build Jerusalem, unto the Messiah the Prince, shall be seventy weeks, and three score and two weeks." This language was understood by those who searched the scriptures, and waited for the fulfilment of the promise. Counting days for years, they had a period of four hundred and ninety years within which Messiah was to appear and to be cut off, but not for himself. It was this prediction which caused many of the Jews, and of

the surrounding nations with whom they had intercourse, to expect the advent of the Messiah at the time of his coming, and it was the general expectation of his appearance which occasioned the rising up of so many false Christs about that period. The Lord Jesus Christ did come, according to this prediction. Although the Jews as a nation were subject to the Romans, they still had laws and a sub-government of their own, the executive power of which was lodged in the tribe of Judah. It is also true that the sceptre was just departing from Judah when the Messiah, the Shiloh, came into the world. He appeared during the existence of the Roman empire; "in the days of those kings did he set up his kingdom." He saw the second Temple, came to it, purged it, and made peace there. The veil of it was rent, and the middle wall of partition was taken down by him.

Again. The place of his birth was designated. It was foretold by Micah the prophet, saying, "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel, whose goings forth have been

from of old, from everlasting," without any professed reference to this scripture, and without any intention of fulfilling it on the part of those who were immediately concerned, it was in a most remarkable manner literally fulfilled. In the providence of God, the whole Roman empire was *shaken*, and the mother of Jesus, in obedience to a decree of the civil authority, but contrary to her own design, went to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born.

His personal character, together with the nature and design of his mission, were foretold. He was to "be a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;" to be a great sufferer, and yet to be a pattern of meekness; "to be led as a lamb to the slaughter." He was not to "cry, nor lift up, nor cause his voice to be heard in the streets." He was to be one who should go about doing good, and who would perform many miracles of the most benevolent kind—such as healing the sick, opening the eyes of the blind, unstopping the ears of the deaf and raising the dead.

The treatment he was to receive and the manner of his death were also the subjects of prophecy. He was to be "despised and

rejected" of men, to have every indignity and unmerited reproach heaped upon him, and to be put to death in a violent manner.

It would not be difficult to collect from the scriptures which were written before the coming of Christ, his life and character, as they were developed during his personal ministry. It is well known that every prediction was accurately fulfilled, and every type fully answered by him. Angels were sent to announce his advent; many signs and wonders were wrought on his account, as well as by himself, to identify him as the long expected Messiah. The Father bore witness to him as his well-beloved son, in whom he was well pleased; whilst the son himself declared, saying, "I am he."

Besides these infallible marks by which the Messiah was to be recognized, there were predictions respecting the state of the nation of Israel and the Church, respecting events which were to occur subsequently to his coming, the fulfilment of which would leave no room to doubt whether the Messiah had come, or whether Jesus of Nazareth were he. According to these predictions, a signal and

exterminating desolation was to come upon the Jews. Their church-state was to be changed and their exclusive privileges to be forfeited. They were to become "not the people of God ; to be without a king, without a priest, without a temple or sacrifices, whilst the Church was to be perpetuated and her borders greatly enlarged by the calling of another people.

All these, and other predictions, have been fulfilled in a most melancholy and painfully faithful manner to the Jews. Their city, their temple, their church-state, have all been destroyed. The kingdom was taken from them, and to this day they remain in exile. These events, which were to be the signs and evidence that Christ had come, having occurred, it is evident they cannot occur a second time to designate any other person as the Messiah. If such an one were promised, as all the Old Testament scriptures declare, and as the general expectation of the nations at the time of his coming proved that he had been, either Jesus of Nazareth was that person, or the scriptures have been broken, and the promised Messiah can never come, according to the predictions of him. The tribe and the royal family in the line of which he

was to come, cannot be distinguished. The Roman government, under which he was to be crucified, and during the existence of which he was to set up his kingdom, has long since passed away. The second Temple, which was to be rendered more glorious than the first by the personal presence of Messiah in it, has long since been destroyed. The time of his first coming has long since expired. The seventy weeks of Daniel have been accomplished over and over again, and yet no Shiloh, no Messiah has come, if Jesus Christ were not that person.

But the scriptures have not been, and cannot be broken. He who was the Desire of all nations has come. "In the fulness of time God did send forth his Son. Unto us a child was born, unto us a son was given; and the government is upon his shoulders, and his name is called, the Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace." It is a true and faithful saying, having been confirmed in the most satisfactory manner, that Christ Jesus has come into the world. He was sent by the Father, as the highest expression of his love. He testified by a voice from heaven that he was his son. The same was also proved by palpable

miracles—by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and by the mission of the Holy Spirit, imparting miraculous endowments to the apostles, qualifying them to be his witnesses.

It is equally true that he came to save sinners, even the chief, and that “whosoever believeth on him shall not perish, but have everlasting life,” which leads us to notice,

II. *The object of his mission.* He came “to seek and to save that which is lost ; to call, not the righteous, but sinners to repentance ;” teaching us that all are sinners, and as such, are lost. To enable us to understand the nature and extent of his work as a Saviour, we must be acquainted with the condition of man as a sinner, for he came to do all that was necessary to reinstate man in the favor of God, to restore in him the image of God, and to bring him to the enjoyment of God as his portion here and hereafter. He came to perform a work adapted to the necessities of sinners, so that we may learn their state and character from what he actually accomplished. “If one died for all, then were all dead.” Yet few are conscious of their lost state. One reason why the Jews were igno-

rant of the character and nature of the work of Messiah, was their ignorance of their own character and wants as sinners, not being conscious of their need of an atonement, other than what they had in their typical sacrifices, and mistaking the nature of that righteousness which the law requires for justification, they felt not and could not perceive the necessity of his humiliation, sufferings and death, but were offended by them. They expected that the prophecies relating to his second coming would be fulfilled by him at his first advent, not understanding that he must *first* suffer, and then enter into his glory. Therefore, when he appeared as a suffering Saviour, that he might be "the Lord our righteousness and strength," he was to them a stumbling-block, whilst they went about to establish a righteousness of their own, and trusted in themselves that they could do so. Those who are of their mind and spirit, and who are imitating their example in this respect, can see no excellency in the Saviour, and do not feel their need of his great salvation. They have no just sense of the evil of sin, nor of what it deserves.

But however some men may view the incarnation and atonement of Christ, whatever may

be thought of the promised work of the Holy Spirit, or though both may be neglected, they are equally necessary and essential to our salvation. If the Saviour had come according to the carnal expectations of men and in the character in which he was expected by the Jews, he would not have been a Saviour from the wrath to come; he would not have been a mediator to effect a reconciliation between God and man; he could not have opened the gates of heaven, nor have purchased eternal life for sinners. The Jews had lost the knowledge of the true God and of the spiritual nature and extent of his holy law, whilst the other nations were emphatically without God and without hope, "darkness covered the earth, and gross darkness the people." So general was the defection from the truth, so universal was the apostacy, that it might be said with truth, "they have all gone out of the way; they have together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good; no not one: there is none that understandeth; there is none that seeketh after God." The way of truth, the way of righteousness, the way of justification by faith, and of eternal life, was not known; wherefore Jesus came to make known the Father, to

declare his counsels and his will, to display his attributes, to interpret his law and to fulfil it, and to reveal the methods of his grace. He came as the great Teacher sent from God, to correct the errors, fabulous traditions and corruptions of the truth, which had been introduced into his Church, and to "preach righteousness in the great congregation."

2dly. Men are guilty as well as ignorant. They are under a just sentence of condemnation: "all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." The law cannot be dispensed with: it is unchangeable, and must be executed, or God would deny himself, which is impossible. Sin cannot be pardoned by an act of sovereignty, for God is just as well as merciful. The wages of sin must be paid, the penalty of the broken law must be endured: therefore Christ "was made under the law, that he might redeem them that were under the law," and "was made a curse, to deliver us from the curse of the law." He came to "give his life a ransom for many, and died, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God." The demands of the law against the sinner

were made upon him, and he answered them fully.

Having taken the place of those whom he came to redeem, he must have experience of what it is to be in their lot. They had deserved sorrow and grief, shame and spitting, to be despised and rejected, and cast out as evil, for they had made themselves outcasts. They deserved to be wounded and bruised, to endure agony, to suffer a painful, ignominious, and accursed death, and to continue under the power of it for ever. Therefore Jesus became "a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and hid not his face from shame and spitting." He willingly submitted to every privation; was "despised and rejected of men, set at naught and cast out as evil. He was wounded for our transgressions, and bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed." He endured the agony of the garden, and "became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." Being God as well as man, his sufferings and death were of infinite value as an atonement for our sins, and were efficacious to redeem us from death. "By the one offering

up of himself, he for ever perfected them that are sanctified." If the blood of bulls and of goats, and the sprinkling the ashes of an heifer, sanctified to the purifying of the flesh," how much more shall the blood of Christ, "who, through the eternal Spirit, offered himself without spot unto God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"

But pardon is not the whole of our justification. It does not entitle us to life, nor restore lost character. There must be a righteousness also, perfect obedience to the law, as the ground of our justification in the sight of it. Man, in his fallen state, is destitute of this, and is without strength to establish it by his own personal obedience. Not only can he make no atonement for his sins; he cannot, when all his sins are pardoned, render that perfect obedience to the law which it requires, and which has the promise of eternal life: wherefore the Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled all righteousness. Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience "by the things which he suffered." "He is the end of the law for righteousness, to every one that believeth." So that his people may say, "In the Lord have we righteousness

and strength," and now God "can be just, and yet justify the ungodly which believeth in Jesus."

3dly. Men, as fallen, are depraved; their understandings are darkened with respect to spiritual things; their hearts are hard and alienated from the life of God; their carnal minds "are enmity against God, not subject to his law, neither indeed can be." The immediate effect of sin on the soul is spiritual death. Those who love it and are under its influence, are dead in trespasses and sins. "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned;" wherefore, Christ has graciously promised to send the Spirit, "to convince of sin, of righteousness and of judgment," to quicken the dead, to enlighten the mind, to renew the heart and to regenerate the soul; and he is faithful to perform what he has promised. He does give the Holy Spirit to them that ask, to work faith in them, and repentance and new obedience.

Again; fallen men are spiritually impotent, even after they have been renewed.

They have arduous duties to perform; they are called to endure severe conflicts and trials; they are exposed to many and great dangers, whilst in themselves, they are weak, not sufficient even to think anything as of themselves. But they have the promise of the presence and support of the Saviour. He has said, "Lo, I am with you alway; my grace is sufficient for thee; I will never leave thee nor forsake thee;" and "through Christ strengthening them, they can do all things."

Such is a very brief description of the state and necessities of sinners, and of the work which Christ came to perform, that he might effect their salvation. Such is the work which he has actually performed. "Though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, that we through his poverty might be rich." He has also acquired an experience which fits him to be a "merciful and faithful high priest for us in things pertaining to God." He knows our frames, and "remembers that we are but dust," and feels a pure and lively sympathy with all his members. "In all their afflictions he is afflicted." Having been "made perfect

through sufferings, he is able to save unto the uttermost all that come unto God by him."

III. With regard to the specific time of his birth, and the manner of commemorating it, there is a difference of opinion and of practice. It is well known that a large portion of the Christian Church observe one day in each year in commemoration of the birth of Christ, although there is no certain record of the day, nor even of the month in which it occurred. It is also well known, that a large portion of the Presbyterian branch of the Church do not observe such a day. The uncertainty of the time, however, of the Saviour's nativity, is not the only nor the principal reason why we do not observe *Christmas*, as it is called, on the 25th of December, as some observe it. As Protestants, we require a warrant from the Bible for every religious observance.

We object to its origin. It was not appointed by the Lord Jesus Christ, nor by his apostles. They neither observed such a day, nor required others to observe it. But if the observance of it had been necessary to the well-being or prosperity of the Church—if it had been re-

quired for the promotion of personal piety, for the spiritual growth or comfort of his people—if it could have answered any salutary end, it would have been appointed by the great Head of the Church. He loved the Church and gave himself for it, that he might wash and cleanse it, and present it to himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing. Surely he did not lack the disposition, nor the wisdom and foreknowledge which were necessary to qualify him to make all appointments, and to institute all ordinances, which might be required for the preservation, peace and purity of the Church, for the awakening of pious and devotional feelings in her members, and for their sanctification.

The Church or the civil magistrate may recommend the observance of days of fasting and prayer, or of thanksgiving, *occasionally*, when the providence of God is sufficiently marked to call for such recommendations. But men have no right to institute new and permanent religious observances, nor can they bind the conscience; God only is the Head and Lawgiver of the Church, and Lord of the

conscience. This day has been appointed by human authority, and has now the sanction of tradition and of usage only for its observance.

There is no certain record nor reliable witness to prove that any feast in honor of the nativity of Christ was observed before the fourth century. James Pierce, in his *Vindication of the Dissenters*—a book published in 1717—says that the most probable origin of the observance of the day which he had been enabled to find, is, that it was invented by the heretical followers of Basilides. He transcribes a notable passage from Clement of Alexandria, from which it appears that those heretics celebrated the feast of Christ's baptism, if not also of his nativity, at the right time of the year, as they persuaded themselves, and that the Catholics were uncertain of the true time of his birth, and kept no holy day in memory of it. "There are some," says he, "who, with greater curiosity, fix not only the year, but the day our Saviour was born; which they say was the twenty-eighth year of Augustus, on the twenty-fifth day of the month Pochan. The followers of Basilides celebrate also the day of his baptism, spending

the whole night before in reading. They say it was in the fifteenth year of Tiberius, on the fifteenth day of the month Tubi. Some say it was the eleventh of that month ; nay, some say he was born the twenty-fourth or twenty-fifth of the month Phormuthi." But neither of these dates will fall on the twenty-fifth of December. The fathers of the fourth century imitated Basilides' followers, for then first was the festival of Christ's baptism instituted ; that of his nativity being removed from the sixth of January to the twenty-fifth of December, as Causaban has observed : " From that time," says he, " the sixth of January retained the name of the Epiphany ; but they began to give a different reason of the appellation from what they did before. For that day, that was before kept as the feast of his nativity, was then observed as the day of his baptism, and of the coming of the wise men of the East ;" p. 222. The same author shows conclusively, also, that the story of Nicephorus, [the object of which was to prove the antiquity of the observance of Christmas,] of the burning of 20,000 Christians, who were celebrating the birth of Christ in a temple of Nicomedia, is fabulous.

We say concerning this day, either it is a holy day, or it is not. If it be a holy day, we must find some record of its appointment in the word of God, and then it should be kept as a holy day, as the Christian Sabbath is kept. The whole of it should be devoted to exercises of religious worship, and then it would lose all its charms in the eyes of many of those who are the most strenuous advocates for its observance. If it be not a holy day—as it surely is not, for we have no record of its appointment, nor of its observance during the first three centuries of the Christian Church; neither is the whole day kept as a holy day by any denomination of Christians—then and therefore, we feel under no obligations to observe it. We may as well meet for public worship on any other day, and we may as well observe any other day as a day of festivity and rejoicing. We very much question, however, either the wisdom or propriety of observing that or any other day in this twofold character, mixing things sacred and profane.

If the Church has authority to appoint one such day, she may appoint more, and there may be no limit to the number of them, and then she

must have authority to enforce the observance of them. She has the right to compel conformity, which is to make her a persecuting Church—all this is matter of history. She has appointed such days, and multiplied them. She has asserted the right of enforcing the observance of them, and of compelling conformity to her canons, and thus has usurped the divine prerogative, depriving of liberty of conscience those whom Christ had made free, and destroying the souls of men. What has been, may be again.

We object to the observance, because it is unnecessary. This is indeed implied in the omission of the Saviour to appoint it, yet it is said we require it. It is true, we require to be reminded of the great "mystery of godliness, God manifest in the flesh." And are we not reminded of it by his Word, by the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, and by the Sabbath? His death and resurrection are to be commemorated, and of necessity his birth and the object of his mission, not once a year merely, but from week to week, and daily, in all our devotional exercises. To quote the words of another, (Clement of Alexandria,)

“we are commanded to worship and honor this same person, who we are persuaded is the Word, the Saviour and Ruler, and through him, the Father—not upon select days, as some others do—but we do it *always*, and by all manner of ways, through the whole course of our lives.”

To judge from the arguments of some, in favor of the observance of such a day, we should be led to suppose that there was no other time or opportunity to think or speak of Christianity, of its evidences, of its claims, of its conservative and salutary influence, of its conquests and ultimate universal prevalence, except on Christmas days.

It should be recollected that God has appointed a weekly Sabbath expressly for the purpose of giving instruction on these subjects, to call the attention of the whole community to their obligations to God for the redemption that is in Christ, to awaken in them a thankful remembrance of those mercies which he has bestowed upon us through the mediation of Jesus Christ, and to call upon them to praise him as he has revealed himself, not only in his works and word, but also in the person of his

Son. There is no subject proper to be considered on a Christmas day, which may not be properly considered on the Lord's day; nor is there any service appropriately to be performed on that day, which may not, with equal propriety, be performed on the Sabbath. Instead of enjoying the mercies and privileges of such a day, once a year, we may enjoy them weekly, by the good and wise and merciful appointment of our heavenly Father. To add to his appointments is to reflect on his wisdom and goodness.

Again; the argument in favor of the observance of such a day must be drawn entirely from expediency. This is to refer the decision of the question to blinded reason, and to every man's opinion; hence are there so many different views of what may be judged expedient. To us it appears inexpedient, and injurious to the interests of religion, to open the door for the appointment and multiplication of holy days, or permanently to observe as a holy day any other than the weekly Sabbath. The principle involved in such appointments and practice, is, in our estimation, highly objectionable and dangerous. And our judgment

on this subject is not a matter of conjecture, but has been formed and confirmed by the history of the observance of such days, and the experience of the Church in all past time. There is a necessary tendency in the adoption of this principle, "that the Church has power to appoint days, and must be governed by expediency in doing so," to increase them. This has been the case in those branches of the Church which have acted upon it. They have so multiplied them, that there are not days enough in the year for the commemoration of what they consider important events. But this is not all: there is a tendency to magnify their importance, and to exaggerate their sanctity, and thus to diminish the respect and reverence for the holy Sabbath of the Lord our God in the minds of those who observe them.

It is notorious, that, wherever Popery prevails to the exclusion of Protestantism, there is no Christian Sabbath;—there are religious services on a part of the Lord's Day, and on the rest of the day amusements, fêtes, military parades, feasting and rioting. Even among ourselves, the day which is said to commemorate the birth of Christ, is regarded by some with

peculiar reverence, as more sacred than the Sabbath; a part of it is observed with superstitious strictness, whilst the remainder of it is devoted to social intercourse and the pleasures of the table. It is considered of far more importance to partake of the sacrament on that day, than on any other day of the year. Is not this a wrong feeling, founded in error? Can the day, appointed by men, add sacredness or solemnity to the divine and holy ordinances of God? We learn from the history of the Church, that these fears are not without foundation. These tendencies and feelings have been developed in other times. In the year 1644, under Charles the First, of England, "when both Houses of Parliament were considering grievances and passing acts for the reformation of the Church, the festival of Christmas occurred on the day which had been appointed to be observed as a monthly fast. The question was agitated by the ministers of London, and by the Parliament, whether they should observe a fast, or have a festival, on that day. It was decided by a majority of the ministers in favor of the festival; but the Parliament issued an order for the observance of the fast,

and that with the *more solemn* humiliation, because, say they, 'it may call to remembrance our sins, and the sins of our forefathers who have *turned this feast—pretending* to honor the memory of Christ—into an extreme forgetfulness of Him, by giving liberty to carnal and sensual delights,—being contrary to the life which Christ led here on earth, and to the spiritual life of Christ in our souls, for the sanctifying and saving whereof, Christ was pleased both to take a human life, and to lay it down again.' ” The historian goes on to say, that this order caused great excitement and disturbance over the whole nation. The Royalists, who were certainly not the best judges in religious matters, raised loud clamors on account of the supposed impiety and profaneness of this transaction; although they could not but know that this, as well as other festivals, is but of ecclesiastical appointment,—that there is no mention of the observation of Christmas in the first or second age (and he might have added the third age) of Christianity,—that the Kirk of Scotland never observed

* Neal's History of the Puritans.

it since the Reformation, but when under the power of bishops, and do not regard it at this day.

Some of the most learned divines among the Presbyterians, as well as Independents, were of the same mind. Mr. Calamy, in his sermon before the House of Commons on that day, used this language : " This day is commonly called Christmas-day—a day that has heretofore been much abused to superstition and profaneness : it is not easy to say whether the superstition has been greater, or the profaneness. I have known some that have preferred Christmas-day before the Lord's-day ; some that would be sure to receive the sacrament on Christmas-day, though they did not receive it all the year after. [Is it not so now?] Some thought, though they did not play at cards all the year long, yet they must play at Christmas ; thereby it seems to keep in memory the birth of Christ. This, and much more, hath been the profanation of this feast ; and truly, I think, the superstition and profaneness of this day are so rooted into it, that there is no way to reform it, but by dealing with it as Hezekiah did with the brazen

serpent. This year, God, by his providence, has buried this feast into a fast, and I hope it will never rise again."

I am aware that it is as unpopular now as it was then, to say anything against the observance of such a day. Almost the whole secular press recommends its observance, and hails the change which has taken place in public sentiment respecting it, and the more general observance of it, as an evidence of increased liberality, and of the prevalence of more enlightened views in the community. It has been said that all nations and all systems of religion must have, and always have had, their festivals; that we celebrate the birthdays of heroes and philanthropists, and why not of the Saviour? Thus degrading the Son of God to the level of a mere man, and his religion to the same platform with the systems of heathen and pagan idolatry—with human systems of superstition and false religion; and thus appealing to human reason and human preferences to decide the wisdom and propriety of a religious observance. All this can have no weight to convince, or to establish the claims of an institution, to the satisfaction of those

who appeal to the word of God as their supreme law, and to the Head of the Church as the only legitimate source of authority in matters of religion. Because we may approve of such an observance—because it may appear to us proper, highly desirable, and may be, in fact, a very pleasant vanity—is no proof either of its divine authority, or of its expediency. Neither is its antiquity any argument in its favor; if it were, then the superstitions and childish rites of the Jews which are older, would have a claim on our regard. Besides, it must be recollected that this observance has been opposed and protested against from its commencement. I know it has become common, in some quarters, to speak lightly of our fathers, who opposed this and similar innovations—to charge them with holding contracted and bigoted views; but to their own Master must they stand or fall: they must be tried by the same law and testimony which will be the rule of judgment to their accusers.

No doubt there are some, weak and inconsiderate enough to imagine, that if the Saviour were to come now into our world, he would be more liberal in his doctrines and precepts,

and would conform more to the public taste—to the fashions, customs, usages and sentiments of this enlightened age, and the present improved state of society,—than he did when he was upon earth, or than he seems to do in his written word. Let us not deceive ourselves, nor be led away by a spirit of self-pleasing. Jesus Christ and his religion are divine and unchangeable as the throne of Jehovah. Their requirements are not matters of expediency, or of human policy, to be accommodated to the times and to the caprices of men. In deciding what is our duty respecting innovations upon the prerogatives of God, and departures from his word, we must consider the principles involved, and also their tendencies.

In looking over the history of the Church, we find that all apostacies sprang at first from slight departures from the truth; and that all the errors and all the evils which have afflicted the Church, had their origin in small beginnings. Trace the mighty river, which overflows its banks, and, like a resistless torrent, submerges and sweeps away all in its course—trace it to its source, and you will

find a little rivulet or a silent spring. We say these things, not to condemn, nor to enter into a controversy with those who may agree to keep such a day, but in self-defence and vindication of our omission. We offer these as reasons why we do not feel under obligations to observe it, and, at the same time, as a solemn warning against the abuse and perversion of human institutions, in which there is a mingling of sacred with profane things. We are not required to be more liberal than our Master, nor to concede more to public sentiment than he did. Our safety consists in following him, and in honoring him in all the ways of his own appointment. Nor can we derive any advantage from adding ceremony to ceremony, though it may be done professedly to honor him; concerning which he will ask us, at his second coming, "Who hath required this at your hands?" The coming of Christ into the world, the object of his mission, the nature of his work, and the accomplishment of it, as declared by his resurrection from the dead, and which is commemorated by the weekly observance of the Christian

Sabbath, are of far more importance than the day of his birth.

If we are conscious of our depravity and lost state as sinners, we shall hail the assurance here given us by the Apostle, as glad tidings indeed. It contains the discovery and the offer to us of the one thing needful. We need use no argument to prove, that the greatest benefit that can be bestowed on man is the salvation of his soul; whilst the greatest calamity, the severest curse, and the deepest misery, that can befall him, is the loss of his soul. The assurance of its safety, and the restoration of it to the favor of God, are the only true sources, and the only sure foundation, of our happiness in this life, and the only effectual means of reconciling us to the grave. What is it that can soothe anguish of spirit, relieve the pains of a broken and desolated heart; that can sweeten the many cares and toils of life; that can support under its calamities, comfort under its afflictions; and that can take away the terrors of death? It is a sense of the love of God, the assurance of his ability and faithfulness to preserve us, and the hope of a blessed immortality. What is it

that causes despair, gives poignancy to grief, an overwhelming power to sorrow and afflictions; that gives Death his sting, arms him with all his horrors, and converts eternity into an everlasting hell? It is the frown of God, separation from him, and a sense of his wrath; it is the loss of the soul. In proportion to the value of the soul should be men's concern for its salvation. But it is not. Ever since the fall, sinners, when left to themselves, appear to be insensible to the value of their souls, and neglect its interests. Although it is their all—that principle of intelligence and of immortality which raises them above the brute creation, assimilates them to angels, and renders them capable of communing with God—and although Jehovah has taught them his estimation of it, by the interest he has manifested for its salvation, giving his only-begotten and well-beloved Son, that he might lay down his life a precious ransom-price for its redemption,—yet sinners devote their time, and the powers and energies of their souls, to the pursuit of those things only which pertain to the body, whilst they make light of their souls' salvation. Surely we need no stronger evidence that men are under the

blinding and hardening influence of sin, and in need of a Saviour, than we have in the manner in which they act in reference to their immortal interests. They are verily guilty—justly condemned, depraved and lost, alienated from the life of God, through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their minds. To seek and to save such, did Christ come into the world. To such is he offered freely, without money and without price. All have a right to this offer of Christ, with his benefits as the only Saviour; and none of those to whom the offer is made are excluded from the privilege of receiving him by faith as their Saviour. To those who neglect him, who will not come to him that they may have life, he is dead in vain. At the same time, he says: “Unto you, O men, I call, and my voice is to the sons of man;” “Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest;” “If any man thirst, let him come unto me and drink;” “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth;” “Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely;” and “Whosoever cometh unto me, I will in no wise cast out.”







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